DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 758 SO 035 059

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TITLE	Faith Partnerships and Public Schools in Philadelphia: Rewards and Perils.
PUB DATE	2003-04-00
NOTE	27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Case Studies; Elementary Education; Field Studies; *Mentors
IDENTIFIERS	Volunteerism

ABSTRACT

In 1999, Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) school superintendent David Hornbeck introduced educators and religious leaders to his requirement that each public school in the city develop a relationship with a faith partner, a religious institution that could share facilities and resources with the school. Hornbeck saw religious institutions and schools as possibly the only two stable institutions remaining in the inner city. He felt that these two should work together to meet the needs of their primary constituents--children. Hornbeck's comprehensive school reform plan included two strategies for public engagement in education: (1) the linking of schools with community-based organizations, and (2) the development of a campaign to bring 10,000 volunteers into the public schools. The faith partnership initiative helped to fulfill both of these requirements for reform. Susan Brin Hyatt, in her work on tenant management, shows how neoliberal principles are manifested in the U.S. emphasis on volunteerism and service at a moment when the state is increasingly relinquishing responsibility for the public welfare. This paper provides an ethnographic account of the type of volunteer effort that Hyatt might critique, examining the motivations and hesitations that characterize volunteer experiences. The paper presents an account of the agency of volunteers in resisting and engaging with the regime of volunteerism in a neoliberal state. It draws on fieldwork with a faith-based mentoring program (one of the most successful in the district, with over 40 volunteers participating each year) at an elementary school in south Philadelphia. (Contains 17 references and 5 notes.) (BT)

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ED 478 758

FAITH PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN PHILADELPHIA: REWARDS AND PERILS

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APRIL 22, 2003
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

SO 035 059

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At a national conference in November of 1999, Philadelphia school superintendent David Hornbeck introduced a new school district initiative that fit seamlessly into a growing national policy discussion of faith-based service provision. Entitled "Faith Communities and Public Schools: Building on Common Ground," the conference introduced educators and religious leaders to Hornbeck's requirement that each public school in the city develop a relationship with a "faith partner," a religious institution that could share facilities and resources with the school. In his opening remarks, he voiced a sentiment that I was to hear repeated many times during my fieldwork: that religious institutions and schools are, in many cases, the only two stable institutions remaining in the inner city and that these two must work together to meet the needs of their primary constituents – children. As an educator and lawyer, he said, he understood the first amendment issues involved in collaboration between church and state. But as a minister, he believed that the opportunities inherent in such a collaboration could not be overlooked.

Hornbeck's comprehensive school reform plan, "Children Achieving," included two strategies for public engagement in education: the linking of schools with community-based organizations and the development of a campaign to bring 10,000 new volunteers into the public schools. The faith partnership initiative helped to fulfill both of these requirements for reform. Both reform strategies were intended to help schools take advantage of the "untapped resources" present within religious organizations in their communities. And both were introduced as compensatory measures in an increasingly poor and dangerous environment, not just in Philadelphia but in the nation as a whole:

> Major changes have occurred in the last 25 years that have fundamentally altered the environment in which our nation's children live. In Philadelphia, as in much of the country, an increasing number of children are feeling the damaging effects of these changes -- growing up poor, insecure in their homes, schools and neighborhoods, physically and emotionally at risk, watching the gap between their needs and their circumstances grow. (Children Achieving Action Design, Component VI)

After-school programs, tutoring, mentoring, and other volunteer efforts were intended to mitigate the effects of economic insecurity.

At the same time, other aspects of Hornbeck's reform agenda asserted that attracting volunteers would not be enough to change a school culture that seemed to discourage real parent and community involvement.

> Past models of parental involvement -- where a few parents served as token participants in committees or were involved only as volunteers -- have not empowered each school's community of parents to be full partners. Too rarely are parents involved in meaningful review of data about student achievement or in the discussion of choices about priorities.... An organizing strategy independent of the District must be accepted and supported so that new relationships of mutual accountability between schools, parents and communities can emerge at the grass roots level. (*Children Achieving Action Design*, Component VIII)

This organizing strategy was implemented by organizations such as the Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project (EPOP) and the Alliance Organizing Project, both of which organized independent parent leadership teams to hold school and district officials accountable for school reform. This approach was intended to give parents the tools to be full participants in their children's education. And in the case of EPOP, this organizing strategy also included the involvement of religious institutions and leaders as advocates of increased accountability and community participation in school decision-making. More broadly, this organizing was "intended to contribute to creating a strong civic culture which can sustain school reform" (Gold and Brown 1998).

Together, these two types of collaborations between schools and faith-based organizations – one focused on recruiting volunteers and the other on organizing for accountability – were to help create the "strong civic culture" that the district envisioned. But in most cases, these two facets of "faith partnerships" were approached as separate projects and were not seen as integrally linked. While churches successfully rallied their middle-class, sometimes suburban volunteers to mentor or tutor in city schools, low-income and minority parents of children in those schools still often "served as token participants in committees," if they were involved in the schools at all. Recruiting volunteers served as a useful mechanism for drumming up interest in the public school system among middle class city residents who sent their own children to private or independent schools. But it did not often foster increased school participation – even at the level of volunteerism – from the parents who had no choice but to send their children to public schools.

This disparity between district schools' valorization of middle-class volunteers from outside the neighborhood and de facto exclusion of low-income parents resonates strongly with recent critiques of neoliberal governance. Neoliberalism is described by Goode and Maskovsky as "the re-embrace of classic liberalism's faith in the economic, social, and moral attributes of unhindered competition and unregulated markets in the current context of welfare state retrenchment." (Goode and Maskovsky 2001). Susan Brin Hyatt, in her work on tenant management, shows how neoliberal principles are manifested in the country's new emphasis on volunteerism and service at a moment when the state is increasingly relinquishing responsibility for the public welfare (Hyatt 2001). She suggests that volunteerism has become a requirement of citizenship for the middle class, while the poor are instead required to prove their citizenship through participation in low-wage work. In fact, Hyatt argues that this neoliberal state both creates and requires a new type of political subject, that of the volunteer, whose job it is to restore civil society in the face of a withdrawal of public resources.

Hyatt's work convincingly describes the political and historical context in which the district's faith partnerships are located. Her thesis is provocative for considering the ways that this volunteer program, despite its participants' intentions of mitigating social inequality, might work to shape the kinds of volunteering subjects required by a neoliberal state. But Hyatt's portrayal of this volunteering subject as one who unquestioningly accepts the superiority of the free market and privatization of state services fails to recognize the more complex characteristics and motivations of real-life volunteers. In particular, Hyatt overlooks the important role that religious organizations play in harnessing the efforts of volunteers. This paper will provide an ethnographic account of the very type of volunteer effort that Hyatt might critique, examining the motivations and hesitations that characterize volunteers' experiences. In essence, I present an account of the agency of volunteers in both resisting and engaging with the regime of volunteerism in a neoliberal state.

In this paper, I will draw on my fieldwork with a faith-based mentoring program at an elementary school in South Philadelphia. This is one of the most successful mentoring programs in the district, with over 40 volunteers participating each year. In many ways, this program has

served as the blueprint for other faith-based mentoring programs in the city, since one of the first participating mentors was later hired by the school district's Family Resource Network to encourage the development of faith-based partnerships at other schools. It is also an unusual kind of partnership, since the program is run not by a formal religious institution but by a tiny, interdenominational Christian community that meets in a house two blocks from the school. This community, which I will call Neighborhood House, is based in part on a commitment to daily prayer and in part on a commitment to the neighborhood.[1] As white, middle-class Christians, its members are in some ways outsiders to this mixed-income, African-American community, but they feel called to stand as a supportive presence in the neighborhood. In this account of their experience of morning prayer, participation in neighborhood activities, and hosting of school functions, we see that the decision to become "volunteers" was not an easy one for the members of Neighborhood House. Their journey has been one of resistance both to a missionary model and to strident political activism (at least within the context of the house). Instead, they have taken up the notions of presence and neighborliness as the idioms through which to frame their volunteer efforts. This "theology of being," the experience of faith that underlies Neighborhood House's approach to neighborhood involvement, is essential to understanding how volunteering has functioned in this context.

Research on mentoring programs in the United States has focused primarily on the outcomes of mentoring relationships for the children involved. These studies are often evaluations of the stated goals of such programs – providing support for at-risk youth – and do not address the wider social and cultural implications of mentoring (Herrera 1999, Johnson 1998, Jucovy 2002, Tierney and Grossman 1995). Even studies that address the complexities of cross-race matching focus exclusively on effects on the youth involved in such a match (Jucovy 2002). The assumptions underlying this literature might be traced to two influential recent analyses of inequality: William Julius Wilson's discussion of the increasing isolation of the urban poor as a result of economic restructuring and black middle class flight and James Coleman's assertion of the importance of "social capital" in educational attainment (Coleman 1990, Wilson 1987).[2] The

[1] All names of individuals and some names of institutions in this paper are pseudonyms.

[2] Freedman traces the contemporary ideology of mentoring to the1983 annual report of the Commonwealth Fund, in which the Fund's president "argues that young people have lost 'natural proximity to caring, maturing adults,' leaving their 'basic need for constructive guidance' unfulfilled" (Mahoney 1983).

two are linked in mentoring programs that seek to counter this increasing isolation of the urban poor by making available to students the social networks that a middle-class mentor offers. The implication of this mentoring research is that the student is the primary recipient of social capital within the mentoring relationship, while the mentor gleans only the sense of satisfaction that comes from helping others. In this paper, I hope to challenge that idea of unidirectional flow of knowledge and experience by shifting our gaze from the child to the mentor and identifying the "capital" that accrues to the middle class volunteer in these contexts of cultural exchange. I argue that mentors gain powerful knowledge of the culture of public schools and of the poor and working class children who attend them. As individuals, they may use that knowledge either to develop a deeper commitment to social equity or to distance themselves further from the community they have entered. But as members of an institution – an established volunteer program run by Neighborhood House – the cultural knowledge they gain and the relationships they establish serve to bolster Neighborhood House's presence in this community.

At the 1999 inaugural conference, school district officials employed two images of faith partnerships. On the one hand, Hornbeck portrayed the faith partnership program as "tapping the resources" of the faith community to benefit local schools. On the other hand, Hornbeck's rhetoric of churches and schools as coexisting inner city institutions suggested a power-neutral partnership between two equal institutions in the same community, in which schools gain volunteers and churches gain potential members. My research showed that neither of these characterizations was entirely accurate. In the case of this mentoring program, participating churches did provide human and financial resources to schools, but they also received something in exchange. What they received, however, was generally not an increase in membership. Neighborhood House was not seeking new members and most of the other churches that contributed volunteers to the program were white, upper-middle class churches in other neighborhoods. Instead, church members received powerful knowledge and experience of "the other" that held the potential both for cross-cultural identification and for deepening negative stereotypes and exotic fascination.

This exchange of cultural knowledge in a situation of unequal power is not addressed by the district's faith partnership initiative. Instead, the district seems to assume that because faith

partnerships match a school with a *nearby* religious institution, the volunteers will have much in common with the schoolchildren they serve. In fact, many of the most successful faith partnerships draw their volunteers from outside the immediate neighborhood. A church in North Philadelphia recruits college students from suburban Villanova University to tutor at a middle school near the church. A church in Center City runs an after-school program at a sister church in South Philadelphia, bringing their own members as volunteers to a neighborhood to which some of them were afraid to drive. A faith partnership in West Philadelphia is headed by a young minister who commutes from his home in the suburbs every day. It is clear that the vision of churches and schools as neighborhood-bound beacons in the inner city, suggested by Hornbeck's conference address, is oversimplified at best. In fact, a recent University of Pennsylvania study showed that only 44.5 percent of church members in Philadelphia lived within a ten-block radius of their congregation, despite the density of religious institutions in the city (Cnaan 2000-1). This number includes Roman Catholic churches, which primarily draw members from a geographic parish.[3] Of course, even volunteers who live in the same neighborhood as the schoolchildren they work with do not necessarily share the children's class, racial, or religious background (as we will see in the case of Neighborhood House). But the fact is that most volunteers do not live in the school neighborhood. And in Philadelphia, where deteriorating vacant houses stand just blocks away from restored colonial homes, even volunteers who live only a short geographic distance from the school where they volunteer may feel that they live worlds away. If faith partnerships are "community-building" initiatives, then, it begs the question: whose community is being built and by whom?

At the time of my initial fieldwork, from January 2001 to June 2002, at Lincoln Elementary School, the site of the Neighborhood House mentoring program, there was no effort to organize parents or to welcome parents into school governance. At that time, I concluded that because this volunteering program was undertaken without a parallel effort to organize parents, the result was that white adults from outside the community became invested in the school – though without real decision-making power – in ways that most local African-American parents were not. The

[3] This study also found that Philadelphia congregations that provide social services do not limit their services to members. "The data from the 1,044 congregations we surveyed indicate that, on average, each congregation-sponsored program serves 43 members of the congregation as well as 62 non-member community residents."(Cnaan 2000-2001:16).

circumstances seemed to support Hyatt's thesis that the current "regime of volunteerism" in America's post-welfare state has championed the volunteer efforts of the middle class while limiting the possibilities for such civic engagement on the part of the poor and working class. Over the past several months, however, the circumstances at Lincoln have changed. In December 2002, a crisis at the school led to the formation of an unusual coalition of parents, teachers, volunteers, and community members that had the potential to engage disenfranchised parents in the daily life of Lincoln School. When the school district announced that Lincoln was slated to close at the end of the 2002/2003 school year, Lincoln's "faith partner," Neighborhood House, expanded from being the administrative center of the mentoring program to also serving as the home base for the Coalition to Save Lincoln School. The shift from service to activism was fairly seamless, and the Neighborhood House community easily widened to include the parents and grandparents who took charge of organizing a strategic plan to reverse the district's decision to close the school.

How might we understand this new role for volunteerism at Lincoln School? I suggest that the formation of the Coalition to Save Lincoln School highlights the potential for ruptures in the regime of volunteerism, spaces where individuals and institutions can move from compensatory volunteerism to activist initiative. In the case of Neighborhood House, the ability to make that transition was based on the experience of cultural exchange inherent in the mentoring program itself, that is, in the depth of relationships developed among mentors, students, parents, teachers, and neighborhood residents. For the individuals who mentored students at Lincoln, the experience of cultural exchange did not always lead to increased connection with or commitment to this neighborhood or issues of equity more broadly. But it was the cumulative power of their interactions with students, families, and school staff that strengthened the commitment of Neighborhood House as an institution to the school and the neighborhood. At a moment of crisis, that deepened commitment and legitimacy established through the mentoring program allowed Neighborhood House to transition from listening *to* the neighborhood to speaking *with* the neighborhood.

Morning Prayer

I first learned of Neighborhood House at a meeting with the administrators of the district's faith partnership initiative, in which they described their goals, motivations, and frustrations with the program. After the meeting, two of the administrators went back to work, and I stood chatting with the third, Helen Long, who told me about her unusual faith community and the partnership that they had developed with a local elementary school. She invited me to join them for morning prayer sometime: 7:15 every weekday morning at her house. It was many months before I finally took her up on that offer. For about a year and a half, I attended morning prayer periodically – about every other month -- and came to know a little something about the spirit of this community.

The three-story, brick rowhouse looks much like its neighbors, except for the expansive, rounded, picture window that breaks the flat surface of the building and extends a foot over the sidewalk. At 7:00, Helen Long, who owns the house and lives in it, unlocks the door, and the members of the group enter as they arrive. On a given morning, there might be five people or seven; I never went to morning prayer on a day when all "official" members of the group were there at the same time. There are visitors and regular friends, too: a Spanish biology postdoc, who lives nearby and comes often; a young married couple who later left Philadelphia to start a missionary project in South Carolina. Longtime member Carol Childress said that at other times in their history, they've also had folks from the neighborhood join them regularly.

The simple ritual of morning prayer is the thread that holds Neighborhood House together. As Helen explained to me the first day we met, the members of Neighborhood House believe that the daily discipline of prayer is central; out of that experience of prayer comes the ability to act – or the wisdom to know when not to act – in the neighborhood. When Helen speaks about prayer, she rarely refers to God. Rather, it is the experience of daily prayer itself that creates the conditions by which she can act with discernment in the world. As she explained to a group of new mentors in September, 2001, "All we did in 1984 was decide we were going to come together and begin to pray every morning and see what comes out of our commitment to prayer. Many things have come, but the most dramatic and visible thing that we are now about, and the

way that we are most present in our particular neighborhood has become our presence in the school."

A Theology of Being

Neighborhood House now has several connections with Lincoln School, the elementary school just two blocks away. The most visible connection is the mentoring program that Neighborhood House members started in 1993 and have administered ever since. Drawing volunteers from churches in the neighborhood and around Center City, the mentoring program brings adults to Lincoln School for an hour a week to meet individually with a student and offer academic and social support. There are no strict rules or guidelines for the interaction; the main purpose is for the adult to be a "wise and trusted friend" for a student with whom he or she develops a potentially long-term relationship.

At that September mentoring workshop, Helen described the history of Neighborhood House and provided a vivid description of the birth of the Lincoln School mentoring program. Neighborhood House began in about 1984, when the priest of an Episcopal church in the neighborhood, "wondered what it would be like for lay people to take some aspects of the more traditional, monastic style of life but not be a traditional monastic. What would it be like for lay people who have jobs and professions and relationships and families to live in the city in a particular place, to share in the worship life of a particular community of faith, and to be continually present in that place, both in the life of the parish and in the life of that neighborhood?" The neighborhood at that time was struggling, sitting on the dividing line between a thriving Center City and a transitional South Philadelphia. Helen was intrigued from the beginning, and with a small initial group, founded this "experiment… of people who want to intentionally be present in our particular neighborhood and share faith and work and see what happens as a result of that." Although they had initially considered living communally, the exigencies of people's personal lives led the emergent group to the compromise of meeting daily, while living separately. And so a small group of white, middle class Episcopalians committed to being "continually present" in this African-American neighborhood.

In about 1991, after parting ways with the pastor, the group decided to leave this church but to remain in the neighborhood. Three of the four members of the group at that time owned houses in the area, and Helen's home became the base for morning prayer. Today, Helen is the only one who still lives in the neighborhood. Over the years, the group has ranged from three people to ten people to eight, with Helen and Carol remaining from the beginning. They continue to meet every weekday for morning prayer, once a week for a meal and discussion of spiritual development, and yearly for a retreat. Their presence in the neighborhood is very conscious; Helen says that it is a spiritual discipline, paying attention to their environment, listening to the neighborhood. But beyond prayer and presence, the group did not have an agenda for action. "Over these 15 years," Helen said, "we didn't really know what would happen as a result of coming together and praying together every morning and sort of listening to God and listening to ourselves, what might happen. We didn't know what the presence would lead to. We did not have a program. We did not want to change the neighborhood. We did not have any idea about a mentoring program."

In many ways, Neighborhood House echoes the approach of community organizers, who see their role – at least initially – as listeners and learners in the neighborhood where they work. But the members of Neighborhood House are really more like ethnographers. They are outsiders to this community who have become insiders by virtue of long-term commitment and interest. And eight years ago, the group asked Carol to be, in effect, a full-time ethnographer one day a week. As Helen explained, "Carol was working part time, and we thought we would ask Carol to spend a day in the neighborhood very intentionally and see what would happen." What happened was the kind of seamless transition from presence to action that the members of the group could accept.

At the mentoring workshop, Helen described the moment of the birth of the mentoring program.

> [Carol] was standing in that big picture window [at my house], where I think most of you have been, and she was looking out that window. And it was in the morning. And along came the kindergarten class from Lincoln School. I guess this would have been about 1993 or 1994. Shirley Davis, who was still working at Lincoln School at the time, as the school/community coordinator – she'd been there probably 30 years at that point. She retired from there. Shirley is also a mentor. Shirley continues to know every person in every house in that

> neighborhood. Shirley Davis and the kindergarten teacher began to walk in front of the big picture window. Carol knew Shirley Davis from the neighborhood, and Shirley saw Carol in the window. And Shirley simply waved, along with the kids, and said, "We're going to the firehouse. Why don't you come with us?" Carol said yes to that invitation, walked out, and went with the kindergarten class from Lincoln School in 1993 to the firehouse. And that really was how it began…

The next day, Carol – who was a health and physical education teacher herself – brought her banjo to the kindergarten class and taught a lesson on health using the banjo. Several months later, a group of three Neighborhood House members went to meet with the principal of Lincoln and asked her what Lincoln's needs were. The principal told them that she would like a mentoring program at the school, and the Neighborhood House members said they thought that was something they could commit to. Two members of the group tapped into the resources of the United Way, to learn about the philosophy and practice of mentoring, and they began to reach out to their wider circles of friends and church networks to recruit mentors.

For Helen, the genesis of the mentoring program fit her unspecified but general hope that Neighborhood House could be a vital part of the community without judgment or imposition. As she told the mentors, "That actually in many ways is a good example of, again, how we at Neighborhood House feel called to be present in the neighborhood, not with an agenda, not with big program ideas, but present in a way where we're intentionally listening, intentionally being neighbors, understanding in some ways that we're neighbors but we're newer neighbors and that it's very important for us to listen." This notion of being new neighbors is at the core of what Carol called a "theology of being," a constant reciprocity of living as "both guest and host" while being present in the neighborhood.

Social Capital and Cultural Exchange

During the 2001- 2002 school year, 44 adults volunteered for the Neighborhood House mentoring program, either as mentors for an individual student or students or as readers who assisted in the lower grades by listening to children read aloud. As a result, 58 children at Lincoln School had a mentor with whom they met weekly for an hour of individual attention. While many of the volunteers – including the program coordinator – questioned the "effectiveness" of their mentoring work (in terms of improved grades, attendance, or behavior),

the Lincoln principal, teachers, and many parents maintained that the mentoring program had a noticeable impact on students' participation in school life. This mentoring program, like many others around the country, is sustained by recent child development research showing that a strong relationship with an adult is a prime indicator of positive long-term outcomes for a child (Benard 1993). Though the results may not be quantifiable, the children's enthusiasm for mentoring and parental and teacher satisfaction with the program indicate that mentors' efforts have had some positive effect on the lives of individual children at Lincoln. But the mentoring program has had broader cultural consequences – both intended and unintended – at this school, in this neighborhood, and in the lives of the mentors themselves. The mentoring program, which attracts adults from all over the city to this school of primarily low-income African-American kids and middle-class, primarily white teachers, is its own kind of cultural borderland. And the members of Neighborhood House – themselves firmly situated as white, middle-class liberals – often serve as either cultural intermediaries or border police in these encounters among mentors, school staff, and members of the various communities making up this small corner of South Philadelphia.

Of the mentors and readers who volunteered with the program in 2001 and 2002, most were middle or upper middle class and learned about mentoring through their church affiliations. Many lived fairly close by, in other parts of Center City, although a few commuted from the near suburbs. Approximately two-thirds of mentors were white and a third were African-American. A handful of mentors lived in the neighborhood, including several older African-American volunteers who had lived near Lincoln School most of their lives and had recently moved into a senior citizen complex close by. At periodic mentoring workshops and celebratory gatherings during the year, these volunteers had the opportunity to share their mentoring experiences and perspectives with one another. And at these gatherings, they tested the fragile balance Neighborhood House sought to maintain between presence and action.

At a mentoring workshop focusing on writing strategies, held in January 2001, one participant described her mentoring experience in terms that set her firmly apart from her mentee. She lamented the child's poor verbal skills, explaining that it was particularly difficult to teach him grammar, because her corrections didn't *sound* right to him. Since the way "they" speak is

grammatically incorrect, correct grammar is just a bunch of rules to them, she said. Later, during a discussion of creative writing activities, one of the writers leading the workshop told about his experience with a child who was writing a story about a superhero. The child couldn't decide how to continue, and the teacher asked him what happened next: does he run into a bank robber? The child said, "My superhero doesn't stop bank robbers. He stops men who beat women." The boy's response disrupted the traditional narrative of the superhero villain and suggested the child's experience with a world of domestic violence. The group sighed sadly at this evidence of the probable violence in this little boy's daily life.

Despite the generally sympathetic tone of these mentors' reflections, they did not sit well with Helen and with Carol, who had stopped in during a free class period to join the group. In response to the writer's story about the child's superhero, Helen tried to turn the conversation away from an emphasis on difference – the ostensible difference between middle class fantasies and the realities of poverty. "There is the truth of the children's lives and alongside that there is the resiliency inside the child and inside the family, right alongside those tragedies," she said, adding, "More than likely, there is somebody within that kid's family or extended family who is there for them." Carol nodded and agreed with Helen. Her next comments seemed directed at the woman who struggled with teaching standard English grammar to her student: "Sometimes in our speaking, we refer to the kids as 'these children' rather than 'the children' or 'our children,' and that can separate us, make the kids into the other," she said. In responding to the mentor's concerns about teaching "correct" language, Carol turned the tables and questioned the "correctness" of her own language use, in terms of its othering effects.

Much of the language of "faith partnerships" proposed by the school district – as well as the language of mentoring workshops and literature – emphasizes the benefits that accrue to children and to schools when outside institutions and individuals develop relationships with schoolchildren. They generally do not address either the motivations and circumstances of volunteer involvement or the experience of cultural *exchange* that is inherent in these relationships. While Neighborhood House members rarely addressed these issues explicitly, events such as the mentoring workshops provided opportunities for them subtly to challenge the motivations of participating mentors and to offer their own vision for "volunteering": their

theology of presence. Helen's comments highlighting the resiliency of poor families seemed designed to discourage the notion that mentors' role is to fill a deficit in the lives of poor kids.[4] Instead, she suggested that mentors see their role as learners, to supplement their own deficient understanding of the lives of poor, African-American families. At this mentoring workshop, which had consisted primarily of open-ended discussion among the mentors, Helen and Carol, as the two participants most invested in the neighborhood and the school, had the last words.

Faith Partnerships and the Promise of Community-Building

In his introductory address at the first "Faith Communities and Public Schools" conference, David Hornbeck suggested that the faith partnership initiative had several explicit goals: to improve academic prospects for children through tutoring and after-school programs, to garner new financial and human resources for schools, and to raise the prophetic voice of the church in the name of equal educational opportunity. As one of the flagship "faith partnerships" in the district, the Lincoln School/Neighborhood House mentoring program is on a clear path to meet these goals. Parents and teachers have testified to the academic and social advancement of kids in the mentoring program. Neighborhood House has raised thousands of dollars to support Carol Childress's cultural arts program at Lincoln, and the presence of 40 to 50 additional adults in the school every week has improved the school climate considerably.

But in addition to these explicit goals, the faith partnership initiative seemed to carry an unstated, implicit goal. Over the course of the four-day 1999 conference, several keynote speakers emphasized their belief that churches and schools must collaborate not only for the good of schools but as part of a broader goal of revitalizing the social and institutional fabric of urban neighborhoods, of rebuilding community and civic culture. They intimated that the way to restore crumbling neighborhoods is by tapping into the good will of churches to motivate members to take an active role in the school and community. Their language draws on theorists of social capital to emphasize the value of civic engagement as a means of community-building (Coleman 1990, Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993).

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[4] For an overview of the education literature discussing the dangers of deficit thinking among teachers and policy-makers, see Valencia 1997.

What Hornbeck's agenda for faith partnerships did not address are the relations of power operating within and around most school-church partnerships, the hierarchies of race, class, and geography that pervade them. As a minister who often speaks with the passion of the pulpit, Hornbeck certainly saw a spiritual dimension to the linking of religious institutions and public schools. His calls for the church to take a prophetic role in advocating for public schools exemplified this spirit. But in the immediate sense, he knew that the primary resource that many middle class churches could offer was the class status of their members, whose financial positions gave them the leisure to participate in volunteer programs. Nonetheless, none of the faith partnership workshops or discussions directly addressed the political or cultural implications of – in the case of the Lincoln mentoring program – importing mostly white, middle class volunteers to mentor poor and working class kids in an African-American neighborhood. Do mentoring programs reinforce the cultural hegemony of the white middle class? Or do they offer a meaningful opportunity for cultural exchange across race and class and the chance for a marginalized group of children to experience the dominant culture in a way that makes it attainable for them?

The volunteers themselves felt this tension acutely. Especially for those who chose to expand their mentoring relationship beyond the school building, the visibility of their own privilege was quite uncomfortable. One mentor spoke about her reluctance to invite her mentee to her stately Society Hill home; her fears were confirmed when her student did finally come to visit and was amazed by things like the huge dollhouse in her grown daughter's bedroom. Another mentor, Sharon, described her realization of the depth of difference between her family's experience and the life of her mentee.

> I've always had the impression that the lower income communities were separate, and unfortunately I have had that sense reinforced. It feels like a different world out there. And one of the things that struck me was when I had Jalisa[my mentee] here last year, my youngest daughter, who was 6 or 7 at the time, when she left, she said to me, "what language is she speaking?"…. I thought, Oh my God, these kids are from the same city. Not only the same country, the same city!

Similarly, Sharon found that Jalisa was often surprised by her family's lifestyle in revealing ways.

> Jalisa's very curious about the family. In fact one of the funnier things, or sadder things I guess she said was, … I said something about [Robert] cooking dinner one night and she said, 'Who's Robert?' And I said, 'That's my husband.' She said, 'You mean that's Jane and Michael's father?' And I said, 'Yeah.' She said, 'He lives with you?' (incredulously). And I said, 'Yeah, as a matter of fact, he does' (laughs). I almost felt depraved, the way she asked me. It was funny.

The irony of this interaction is clearly that Sharon does not really think she herself is depraved; in fact she feels that her own lifestyle is fairly mainstream and socially acceptable. What makes this situation "sad" for Sharon is the clear implication, from Jalisa's surprise, that marriage and shared domestic space between parents is not the norm in Jalisa's community. Earlier, Sharon had acknowledged that Jalisa had a strong extended family in the area and often spoke about her sisters, her mother, and grandmother. But Sharon also admitted finding it "daunting" that Jalisa's grandmother was younger than she was. Though reluctant to judge, Sharon clearly saw her mentee's lack of a two-parent, nuclear family as a deficit to be overcome.

Sharon was highly aware of the class and cultural differences that separated her daughter's world from that of her mentee. Part of the reason that she invited her mentee to spend time with her family was so that her children would have the chance to get to know a child their age with completely different life experiences. But this was certainly not a situation of egalitarian cultural exchange. Although Sharon was careful never to assert that her own lifestyle was superior to that of her mentee's, she certainly believed that children at Lincoln needed interaction with communities outside their own neighborhood. In fact, she explicitly articulated one of her motivations for mentoring as the opportunity to give Lincoln kids a positive experience with white people, with whom she thinks they have had very limited and often negative interactions. It was not clear, however, why she thought this interaction was so important: from the preceding comments, it seems that she believed interaction was both a way of healing fractured race relations in the city and a way for Lincoln kids to see outside their poor neighborhood, to envision a future more like the one that Sharon's own kids could imagine for themselves.

Minimizing Difference

This struggle to offer something "more" to Lincoln kids without falling into a deficit analysis of their lives parallels the ongoing tension that Neighborhood House members experience as an

integral part of their presence in the neighborhood. Their tendency seems to be to divert attention away from cultural difference between mentors and mentees, teachers and students in order to avoid making judgments about the neighborhood in which they live as guests/hosts. The danger, of course, of minimizing difference is the risk of eliding the very real material effects of racism and social inequality, manifested most noticeably in the inequities of the public school system itself. Despite the contributions that mentors have made to students' social and academic success and to the overall school climate, Lincoln remains one of the lowest performing schools in Pennsylvania, as measured in state test results. In 2001, 91% of fifth graders scored below basic in reading, and 71% scored below basic in math on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment examination ("Report Card on the Schools 2001-2002" 2002).

Susan Brin Hyatt has argued that the recent turn toward a public valorization of volunteerism and service is linked to a broader neoliberal political agenda. Her analysis has clear implications for the faith partnership program I have described. As she explains, "Neoliberal governance masks the withdrawal of public resources from *all* communities by making volunteerism an *obligation* of citizenship for the working and middle classes, while simultaneously diminishing the significance of volunteerism in poor communities toward the end of creating an extremely low-paid workforce" (Hyatt 2001). Many of the families at Lincoln, where 96% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, have been affected by recent welfare reform policies requiring them to work longer hours in exchange for welfare benefits. During the period of my primary fieldwork, the school did little to foster parent leadership, with the principal allowing a small clique of parents to dominate a home and school council with little or no input on the budgetary, curricular, or personnel issues at the school. In other words, while the mentoring program brought valuable external resources to Lincoln School, the broader policy focus on volunteerism within the district may have concealed the real reasons that volunteers are so desperately needed in Philadelphia's public schools: Volunteerism cannot adequately address the problems of large classes and lack of materials, results of Pennsylvania's longstanding disinvestment in public education.[5]

[5] State funding for public schools in Pennsylvania has declined by 36% over the past 25 years. The state also has one of the most inequitable public education systems in the country, with a $9,000 gap per student between the highest and lowest spending districts (*Quality Counts 2003: "If I Can't Learn From You"*).

As Hyatt explains, "The current emphasis on volunteerism as a necessary and laudable public virtue has served to mask poverty as a site of social and material inequality *and to obscure the role that state action continues to play in reproducing such inequalities*" (Hyatt 2001:206, emphasis in original).

In terms of community-building, we have seen the ways that Neighborhood House, as a bridging institution, served to link school faculty, mentors from outside the community, and neighborhood institutions and individuals. But the mentoring program did not initially seem to be succeeding in fostering the democratic participation and inclusion that are the underlying goals of community-building efforts. While this "faith partnership" brought many middle class volunteers into contact with the public school system and with the working class and poor families of this neighborhood, it did not increase the opportunities for parents and local community members to gain influence over the public school's academic program or over development efforts within the community. In fact, it could be argued that the mentoring program privileged the civic engagement of the middle class over the poor and working class residents of the neighborhood. Lincoln School now has a corps of dozens of mentors who consult with teachers, participate in the school fair, question how the district policies will affect this school. One mentor said explicitly that one of her motivations for volunteering was to foster an attachment with the public school system, a community connection that she felt she was missing since her children began attending private school. But few parents participated in school functions, and the home and school council rarely held meetings, because the president was certain no one would come.

The Emergence of Parent Leadership

Although this paper addresses primarily my fieldwork during 2001 and 2002, it would be unfair to end the story here, as so much has changed during the current school year. The events of the past three months, from January to April, 2003, have suggested that deep and committed partnerships between faith institutions and public schools do have the potential to spur democratic citizen action around public education. As discussed above, the uneven participation of mentors and parents in the school highlights our societal privileging of middle class volunteerism. But recent events have shown that the experiences of such volunteers can also lead to something more: to an active collaboration among parents, mentors, and school staff that

allows the voices of both volunteers and parents to be heard. These events also reveal, once again, the ways that the school district's perception of communities as "local" conflicts with the realities of the cross-sectoral, cross-geographic nature of school partnerships.

On the morning of December 20, 2002, the last day of school before winter break, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that Lincoln was one of four elementary schools slated to close at the end of the school year as part of the district's far-reaching capital construction plan. The closures were portrayed as a cost-cutting measure targeting under-enrolled schools with outdated facilities. That morning, two awards ceremonies and holiday programs were scheduled at Lincoln, one for the lower and one for the upper grades. At the end of the program for the younger children, after all awards had been handed out, the principal, Catherine Allen, asked the students to return to their classes, then closed the auditorium doors and turned to the 35-40 parents and several mentors left in the room. Her voice shaking, Catherine announced that she had some bad news. Tears leaking down her cheeks, she told us that the district had decided to close Lincoln in June.

Parents gasped in surprise. Catherine apologized that this news had to come just before Christmas, but she explained that she had only heard of the decision the day before. Thanking her staff and lauding the many accomplishments of the school, she handed out the letter given to her by the school district, announcing the closure. She told parents that she didn't know where their children would be sent in the fall; all she knew was that the district would be holding a meeting early in January to discuss the decision. A parent asked whether this was the final decision, and Catherine said that she only knew what she had been told, and that this was as final as things ever are in the rapidly-changing world of the school district.

Now the tone of the discussion turned from surprise and sadness to anger and resolve. One parent said that, as a taxpayer, she was not going to just give up. Explaining that she chose to send her grandchildren to Lincoln because of the success her other grandchildren experienced here, she said she would organize to oppose the closure. "This is about education, this is about freedom. This is our neighborhood…" she said with conviction. Another parent, perhaps 20 years younger, reminded the group that the closure was not inevitable, that the district had tried

to shut Lincoln down before and failed. When she was a student at Lincoln in the 1980s, she said, the parents marched downtown and convinced the district to keep the school open. "So, don't give up now," she urged. "I heard everyone yelling and clapping for their baby today. Let's go yell and clap for them tomorrow, downtown!"

These two women have gone on to become leaders in what has become known as the Coalition to Save Lincoln School. At the beginning of January, the small group of parents, teachers, community members, and mentors met at Neighborhood House to plan their strategy for keeping Lincoln open and successful. They compiled a list of Lincoln's strengths, including its small size and small classes, its mentoring program, and its cultural arts curriculum. They discussed the proposed boundary changes and the fact that two of the four schools slated for closure were located in their neighborhood – in addition to a Catholic school nearby that was also to be closed in June. They speculated as to whether this was an attempt to drive African-Americans out of the neighborhood to make room for a gentrifying white population. And informally, over coffee and leftover Christmas cookies, they reestablished connections built through the school: retired teachers catching up with a former student who is now a parent of a first grader at Lincoln. At the end of the evening, they resolved to continue meeting every week until Lincoln was saved.

Indeed, the group has stood by the promise, and now stands on the cusp of victory. Over the course of January, February and March, they gathered data on the design of the school building, the potential for overcrowding in neighboring schools if Lincoln were to close, the community partnerships in place at Lincoln, and the district's recent investment in the Lincoln facilities. With the help of the school staff, they developed several proposals for increasing enrollment at Lincoln. They developed a partnership with the president of the local neighborhood association, who provided crucial information about the rapid pace of neighborhood development and growing pool of school-aged children. They also forged a bond with the local Democratic ward leader, who helped guide them through the process of gaining support from elected officials at the city and state levels.

A core group of supporters continued to meet every Sunday night at Neighborhood House, wrestling with differences of opinion over tactics and approach but maintaining a shared

commitment to the cause. That most active core consisted of: three members of Neighborhood House, Helen, Carol, and Rosalie, who directed the mentoring program; Chloe, a grandmother of a Lincoln student and her son Paul, an uncle of the student – both had strong community organizing experience and quickly took on leadership roles; Sheila, a mother of a Lincoln first-grader; and John, a mentor, Lincoln alumnus, and neighborhood resident. I also was considered a core member of the group, attending meetings primarily in my capacity as a volunteer in the mentoring program and secondarily as a researcher. The core group remained constant, with more peripheral members rotating each week.

Carol insisted that the goal must be not only to keep Lincoln open but to maintain the small classes and quality programs that made it a school worth saving. This ethos pervaded the power-building events the group planned to advance their cause: an open house, called Lincoln School Community Day, to show off the school's programs to parents of potential students; individual meetings with city council representatives and other elected officials; several meetings with the district CEO; a public hearing before city council; and the raising of a banner each morning in front of the school building reading "Save Lincoln School."

For Neighborhood House, this was the beginning of a new kind of presence in the neighborhood. More than just serving as host to the group, Helen in particular became one of its most active leaders. The house became coalition headquarters, its large picture window plastered with signs on bright construction paper: "Keep Lincoln School a School" and "I am a Mentor at Lincoln School." The members of Neighborhood House never formally decided to take on this more active, politicized role, but the moment felt right to everyone. Just as Neighborhood House's original conception of the mentoring program had sprung from a long process of "being" in the neighborhood, this new role emerged as a result of nine years of slowly expanding relationships with teachers, students, and parents at the school.

By the end of March, it appeared that the battle was nearly won. At the school district's budget hearing before city council, when the coalition made a lengthy presentation appealing for council's support, district CEO Paul Vallas admitted that he was reconsidering his recommendation to close Lincoln. At that hearing, the president of city council offered a

standing ovation to the Coalition to Save Lincoln School, saying "In all of my years in the community, I have never seen the community rally on one issue as they have on the Lincoln School issue." Vallas himself responded enthusiastically to the councilwoman's support, showering praises on the coalition for its civility and lack of hostility ("The meetings were delightful," he said. "You come in hoping you could get out in an hour and then you stay for two and a half hours and you're the last one to leave.") In addition, he commented, he appreciated the "multiculturalism" and "socioeconomic diversity" of the group.

From the first announcement of the school's potential closing, members of Neighborhood House mourned the possibility that their multiple and extended relationships with the school would be lost. At the public meetings when the district presented their case for closure, officials insisted that the programs in place at Lincoln would move with the students to their new schools nearby. But to Lincoln's partners, these arguments only revealed more clearly that the district, in Helen's words, "didn't get it"; they didn't understand that the mentoring program was not just a social service program but an offshoot of Neighborhood House's rootedness in their small piece of the neighborhood. Once the Coalition to Save Lincoln School formed and began to build power, Vallas glimpsed in the group not only an unusually diverse local association but also a potential ally in his attempts to gain the support of a wide range of constituencies throughout the city. From the start, Vallas attempted to recruit the group's leaders as district employees, a tactic that the coalition members agreed was a ploy to co-opt the group. Later, Vallas began to consider how, if Lincoln remained open, he might use these leaders and this model to ease his work in the rest of South Philadelphia. At the city council budget hearing, Vallas explained why he was reconsidering the recommendation to close Lincoln:

> There's something to be said for the community coming together, whatever the catalyst is, whether it's a good catalyst or a bad catalyst. And I need this community not only for Lincoln.... I need this community to come together for *all* the schools in that cluster, because all the schools need this kind of community effort and this outreach and these partnerships.

Elsewhere, I have discussed the fluid and shifting identification of "community" that has affected attempts to establish community partnerships with public schools (Mundell 2003). Conflicts over who legitimately has the right to represent "community" in South Philadelphia surfaced early on in the district's current reform effort and have not

disappeared as the Coalition to Save Lincoln School emerged to stand up to the district's consolidation plans. Thus far, the coalition has maintained a fragile legitimacy by nurturing relationships with other teachers and parents, as well as elected officials and one neighborhood association. They have also won support by remaining steadfastly committed to one, straightforward goal: to keep Lincoln School open. If the coalition can, as its members hope, sustain itself after that goal is met, and begin to address more complex and conflictive issues of school governance, curriculum, or school/community relations, that tenuous legitimacy will likely be challenged. If, as Vallas hopes, the members of the coalition were to expand their advocacy efforts to other schools in the South Philadelphia cluster, without the relational base that has sustained their work thus far, they are unlikely to be received as legitimate representatives of "the community."

This coalition, like the mentoring program out of which it grew and Neighborhood House itself, represents a particular kind of "local" activism. Earlier, I discussed the way that the district's faith partnership initiative assumed that proximity of religious institutions and schools implied a shared experience of the local neighborhood; in fact, most church members (and even clergy), teachers, and some students commute to those institutions from very different homes and life circumstances. Similarly, the Coalition to Save Lincoln School, which Vallas identifies as the "community" for South Philadelphia schools, is both much broader and much narrower than he seems to imagine. At the public hearings and open meetings on the school closure issue, when supporters of the school have packed the Lincoln auditorium and the city council chambers, the majority of those participants are not residents of the Lincoln area. Many of the vocal activists *are* neighborhood parents, alumni, staff, and other residents, but many are also mentors and teachers who have developed a longstanding commitment to Lincoln despite the varied distances they travel to get there from their homes in other parts of the city and suburbs. In this way, the coalition is much broader than the Lincoln neighborhood.

At the same time, this broad-based partnership is extraordinarily local, dependent on long-standing and deep relationships established through Neighborhood House, the mentoring program, and attachments to this particular elementary school. Although some

of the most vocal and active members of the coalition are parents who have newly become acquainted with Neighborhood House, the House's theology of presence permeates the group. And as I have discussed above, this is a presence rooted in face-to-face relationships, in walks around the neighborhood and shared meals. This commitment to the local will not easily be expanded or abandoned in order for the coalition to become advocates for all of South Philadelphia, as Vallas suggests.

Nonetheless, this model of cultural exchange leading to coordinated activism on behalf of schools should not be ignored. It is a testament to the force and potential of Neighborhood House's theology of being and its members' commitment to guide mentors toward reciprocal relationships with the community. After completing my primary fieldwork, I concluded that Neighborhood House was a faith partnership that supported schools not by bolstering local institutions or empowering parents, but by garnering the human resources of middle class neighborhoods and the suburbs. I critiqued the "regime of volunteerism" under which such faith partnerships operate, in which the volunteer service of the middle class is privileged over the participation of the poor and working class parents in the school their own children attend. But the events of the past few months have shown that, at a moment of crisis, the social relations of the mentoring program – fraught as they are with the power dynamics of inequality – *can* be converted to social capital. Parents whose children participate in the mentoring program trusted Neighborhood House to host meetings of the Coalition to Save Lincoln School. Mentors wrote letters to elected officials and school district administrators with whom they have relationships. Members of Neighborhood House used their longstanding experience in the neighborhood to reach out to community leaders and neighborhood associations. And Neighborhood House itself, through its members' nine-year experience of listening and learning from Lincoln School, has activated its notion of "presence," stepping into the heart of a political battle that they hope will lead to long-term community support for the school.

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